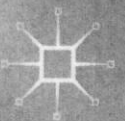


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INTIMACY ACROSS VISCERAL AND DIGITAL PERFORMANCE

Edited by MARIA CHATZICHRISTODOULOU
and RACHEL ZERIHAN



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INTIMACY ACROSS VISCERAL AND DIGITAL PERFORMANCE

Intimacy Across Visceral and Digital Performance

Edited by

Maria Chatzichristodoulou

and

Rachel Zerihan

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8 Between Bodies: An Artist's Account of the Oral Connection Between Human and Dog

Angela Bartram

In the essay *Half Wild and Unwritten*, published in Adrian Heathfield's edited volume *Live: Art and Performance*, Brian Catling talked about the 'strange beast of performance' (Catling in Heathfield, 2004, p. 47). With this terminology, Catling suggested the live performing body as synonymous with animality, for in being observable it represents the objectifiable other. Attention is given to the body being animal as manner and physicality are observed. Created both physically and psychologically for Catling, the behaviour of the body seen 'in the spotlight' becomes synonymous with this image. Keith Thomas stated 'it was as a comment on human nature that the comment of "animality" was devised' (1983, p. 41) and this has bearing for Catling's analogy. The spectator recognizes the performers' body as close in physicality and sensibility to themselves and this allows for a sense of understanding of the actions in which it is engaged. However, the performer's body is rendered as other and distinct through the process of observation. It represents that which is similar *and* different to the viewer. Situated as a public site of social intervention the performing body serves as a simultaneous human and animal referent.

The participants in performance¹ are involved in a transient relationship that elicits connectivity. The existence of a defining and separating space between action and observation makes this possible, and it is here that meaning and understanding reside and a sense of intimacy is created. As the defining entity of the event, the performer necessarily makes us aware that this association of observer to observed, of self to other is always temporal and ephemeral. They orchestrate a situation where a connection is established and similarities between bodies become apparent. These interlacing moments are used to constitute the nature of the event through a developing sense

of familiarity between participating bodies. This connection alludes to that which Michel Foucault described as existing between the 'encoded eye and reflexive knowledge' (2002, p. xxii). The performer's 'human' familiarity allows the observer to connect with, and understand the effect of the event through empathetic (produced by the experience of living in a similar body) and visceral response. It demonstrates, in Foucault's sense, how reflexivity is possible in perceptions of performance. In essence, a relationship is created where the audience comes to acknowledge that they too are performatively observable as part of the event. The process creates a situation whereby the scopic range becomes a self-perpetuating loop that holds the performer and observer hostage in spectatorial exchange. Foucault's 'arrested gesture' (2002, p. 3) can be used in this context to describe the effect, as it is produced through a developing and binding sense of intimacy between participants.

*Something tastes foul in my mouth
– I feel a compulsion to spit*

The intensity of the experience is informed by participating bodies being close, and within each other's reach. Essentially, significant reduction of proximal range pronounces engagement with, and heightens awareness of the performer's actions for the viewer. A sense of transgression can become apparent in this situation, as the viewer's lack of personal space is made evident through the performer's encroachment. Often irrespective of the nature of the action, the performer's imposition makes them accountable for any vulnerability felt by the audience, and it is this that can mark the effect as transgressive. For ultimately, and despite corporeal familiarity and connection, the performer is established as distinct and other to the audience through the process of performance. The effect of the overall experience becomes exaggerated when the space between action and mediation is reduced, as this effectively places the observer at the performance's core. This acknowledgment develops an understanding in the viewer that they are a visible and essential part of the performance. Intimacy creates vulnerability at this acknowledged moment and results in debate around the performer's intent. The performing body is, therefore, a potential site of contravention in this context, and this is made explicit when the event includes, or is defined by actions that challenge appropriate levels of conduct or behaviour. Here it is not only marked as other, but in behaving anti-socially, it is also the animalized other.

My mouth starts to salivate in response

– *Saliva collects in my mouth*

Performances that rely on visceral and reflexive experience layer transgression on to an already fractious situation when bodies are in close contact. The denial of acceptable distance between bodies allows the unacceptable and the other to emerge through direct confrontation. Contravention, as that which is in conflict with the conventional relations of polite and appropriate distance in conventional relations between humans, introduces the anti-social, the irregular and 'wild' into the relational dynamic. The 'transgressive' performer is often regarded in contrast to their human and, thereby, social self and rendered 'animal'. In this respect, the 'animalism' of performance, as the circumstance in which the animal nature of the (mis)behaviour is recognized, is exposed. In being close to the performing body the viewer is asked to consider the other and the animal in direct relationship to the self, and this informs how they respond. An uncomfortable and problematic experience can be provoked, one that sees the viewer regard their position to the event. In being present and standing close to the performance they may feel tarnished by its effect, for as a 'willing' observer (for they have made a conscious choice to attend even if they feel uncomfortable) they are potentially implicated as other and animal by association.

The 'animal' effect on the performer can become more pronounced with the inclusion of *non-human* animals, henceforth referred to as animals. Essentially, this can serve to underscore the performer's transgressions (that mark them as other and animal) and give further recognition through the reference the 'actual' animal brings. Transgression and 'being animal' is a dynamic part of my work as an artist, which intends to make the intimate and visceral explicit. The work situates the context of the animal through the visible denial of physical and psychological space between human and animal bodies. Specifically, this discussion concerns *Licking Dogs* (Figure 8.1), a performance made with four dog participants for a video installation in 2007. *Licking Dogs* shows me licking and being licked back by four dogs (Figure 8.1). The priority of situating and exposing the animal occurs not only by the inclusion of dogs in this work, but also by the focus given to the human mouth. Georges Bataille referred to the mouth as an 'orifice of profound physical impulses' (Stoekl, 1985, pp. 59–60), which is relevant when considering human-animal similarities. The behaviours of articulation and mastication are a reminder that the human body is a hybrid of the

social and the biological. Performing actions that are necessary for bodily preservation and social interaction, it is significant as a paradoxical site of the articulate and the bestial. The mouth additionally enhances this duality to confront onlookers with a relational conflict between self and other by being both public and private. This is particularly apparent when the mouth is open, despite being necessary for the articulation of language. An open mouth represents danger of contamination of the impolite, the unruly, and the animalistic drive. It can spit, dribble, vomit and ooze; it can utter profanities, slurs and defamations.

The saliva passes over my tongue

– *I taste it*

The physical gap between individuals is closed, even if only for a moment, when they touch, and can be important for how we physically and psychologically relate to that which we perceive as other. Walter Benjamin (1997) believed full recognition of the similarity between species arose through physical contact, and this makes touch, and comprehensions of touch, significant for psychological interpretation.² Indeed, the 'type' and method of touch between humans and animals is significant for considerations of acceptability and standard. Generally, oral touch or kissing is (unless violent or unwanted) acceptable behaviour between humans, but its purpose becomes awkward, questionable and incongruous when an animal is involved. The rules of engagement between different species become shaken and fragile through interaction considered 'improper' and unacceptable. The complexities that arise through human/canine touch in this way informed the development of *Licking Dogs*.

My lips press together ready to spit

– *They part in anticipation*

As *pets* dogs are significant others. Pets are the favoured animal companions of humans, yet despite this, dogs face prejudices to do with breed specific preconceptions and assumptions on a daily basis. As pets, dogs are animals socialized by humans, yet they are inherently imbued with their status as animal. They remain animal and animalized despite their companion status. This representation can transfer on to the human thought to be transgressive in their relations with dogs, for transgression foregrounds the animal within the society. It highlights the difference that marks the behaviourally anti-social. I work with dogs whose mouths aggravate and exaggerate anxieties specific to their breed and perceived temperament;



(a)



(b)

Figure 8.1 Angela Bartram, Stills from *Licking Dogs* video installation.



(c)



(d)

Photos courtesy of the artist

slobbery or large mouths attributed to aggression, or those that are used to hunt and kill. Their size, breed history or generous salivary capacity makes the idea of touching dogs' mouths troublesome, and in doing so the human perpetrator opens up their motives to interrogation – questions may be raised concerning intent. Susan McHugh stated that 'dogs provide primary connections across animal and human worlds' (2004, p. 19) yet despite this, the manner of their inclusion in performance can raise questions of propriety which impact on how the work is perceived, particularly when this involves human-canine oral touch.

My head pulls back
– *My chest swells*

Animality and humanity collide when canine and human mouths lick, kiss or share other methods of oral exchange, and this presents a challenge to appropriate levels of intimacy across socio-biological boundaries. The desire in *Licking Dogs* is not to specifically shock or alarm (although it is acknowledged that the content often leads to this response), but it intends to raise questions about the parameters of humanity by presenting the participants as equals at ease with one another. A concern was to explore acceptable and appropriate relations between a female human, and four dogs marked aggressive or anti-social by their breed characteristics. Donna Haraway (2005) considered 'dog writing' (as that which examines the significance of dogs within society) a branch of feminist theory. There is a connection that exists between women and dogs for Haraway, irrespective of species (2005, p. 3), and this is reflected in the oral display in 'Licking Dogs'. Dynamically connected as compositional equals the participants mirror each other's position – the dogs and I perform the same act and behave in the same way. The intent is to challenge conventions and preconceptions to do with the human and animal, and agitate a discussion on appropriate levels of interspecies relations. Janet Wolff stated that the 'ways in which women experience their bodies is largely a product of social and political processes' (1990, p. 133) and this has bearing for perceptions of this work. As the person engaged in licking, my status is addressed for its social transgression, and the effect of this close encounter with dogs on my role as human and woman can be analysed.

My tongue curls in readiness
– *I press it between my lips*

Through an examination of where the lines concerning action, intent and interpretation between companion species should be drawn, *Licking*

Dogs examines the notion that women are considered as both social and animal. Behaviour and bodily function suggests our similarity to other species, and this is specifically relevant to the female body as it enacts traditional mammalian traits. Inhabiting biological bodies that give birth and suckle, women represent the animal within humanity and are a reminder that we are all essentially animal. *Licking Dogs* makes this human-animal connection visible, as the demonstration of mutually engaged licking establishes a sense of visual equality. The participants have equivalence in their visual positioning and behaviour – face-to-face, eye-to-eye, tongue-to-tongue, and lick-to-lick. We face each other with mouths at the same level. The licking in this work is mutual and simultaneous – the dogs and I lick each other's mouths, each other's teeth, and each other's tongues; we share and ingest each other's saliva. This is not intended as kissing as a sex act, but the exploration of the oral dimensions of another species. For the tongue does more than lick and taste, as it is also used to articulate speech. The dogs and I are to be considered, irrespective of species, in respect of the other. Essentially, we are seen as orally connected beings operating as a unit, as two halves of a collaboration that serves to bring attention to our animal similarity through intimate contact. An analysis can be made in terms of the human/animal and how they relate and interrelate in the composition. This allows the status of each participant to be examined and preconceptions to be challenged. It becomes possible to question the appropriateness of my action as the human, and supposedly more 'social' being, and about the preconception of dogs as biting, aggressive animals (particular with regard to the German Shepherd and Rottweiler whose breeds are considered dangerous).

My jaw feels tense
– *My mouth contorts*

The performing body's physicality is discussed as a theatrical 'tool' by Kathy O'Dell (1998) in *Contract With the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s*, and this appears appropriate when discussing collaboration in performance.³ Collaborating bodies work as part of a system within performance and operate like mechanisms in a machine working in productive harmony. They are equally necessary performative tools that trust and respect the others involvement. In this respect, collaboration can be regarded in alignment with Haraway's (2005) concept of companion species, in that there has to be at least two participants to make a trusting relationship.⁴ For companion relationships are collaborations between species, and the activity within *Licking Dogs*,

built on mutual trust and respect between participants, works with this notion. The tit-for-tat process of licking establishes a reflexive encounter between species that temporarily sees woman reflect dog and dog reflect woman. The effect allows a discussion to emerge regarding similarity and position, humanity and animality, and acceptability and outrage. For there are circumstances where it is reasonable for a dog to be humanized in companion relations, for a pet becomes part of a 'family', but not necessarily for a human to be animalized. It is okay for a dog to share the house and adopt human ways, but it would be unacceptable for a human to live in a kennel and behave in a 'dog-like' way.

I throw my head forward

– I spit with force

Licking Dogs suggests the sexually explicit and bestial, the unacceptable and improper, and this interpretation agitates and upsets the boundary between human and animal. I purposefully create a dilemma for both my species and gender as the perpetrator of the interspecies oral dynamic. For when a woman becomes socially conspicuous and objectifiable, her humanity and animality is open for discussion. This is because women are locked into a pattern of animal referents to do with birthing and suckling that it seems impossible to escape, and in acting improperly, she becomes visibly more animal-like. Animal heritage cannot be shaken off, and the behaviour becomes explainable *because* of her status as a woman. In effect, her human and animal actions present a sense of species hybridity directly. This in itself has the potential to feel corrupt and bestial as it challenges normative tolerable states of interaction. My presence reflects this in *Licking Dogs*, for it exposes the animal within the human through action and intent. The response is visceral and intuitive. The viewer instinctively acknowledges that I am female and human, and it is this that provokes disbelief in respect of my 'animal' behaviour. Consequently questions are provoked that challenge my status not only as a woman, but also as a human. In overstepping a social boundary by being intimate and transgressive with dogs, I become visibly contentious as a woman, a performer and human being in my celebration of animal otherness.

I lick my lips

– The residue smears

The exchange, and the nature of the exchange in *Licking Dogs*, activates a fundamental question to do with how and where humans draw

boundaries with other species. There are social challenges that human-canine oral touch provokes to do with correct and incorrect behaviour, right and wrong methods of contact, which are aroused through the process, and the act itself. Saliva, as the bodily fluid of the oral, is also important in this consideration. Beyond intimacy with the self through eating, and with another through sexual relations, saliva can be regarded, both in biological and social contexts, as problematic. Spitting is an example of saliva made uneasy through action, as it is often uncomfortable to watch and anti-social in its manner. That saliva is inevitably exchanged between mouths in this work contributes to the debate, for it tends only to be acceptably swapped between humans. Sharing saliva alludes to sexual interaction, and by this measure, the action in *Licking Dogs* agitates anxieties concerned with bestiality and the indecent. Keeping correct distance enforces the defined and constituted difference from other animals, and any breach provokes questioning around human intent. As the woman involved in the work, I am visible as the constant protagonist and instigator (I perform with each of the four dogs), and therefore it is my sense of propriety, humanity and personability that is called to account. In the pursuit of raising questions on the human/animal divide, and because I am a visual construct in the mechanism by which this will be engaged, my socio-human morality is willingly exposed for debate. As both the 'other' in the performance and the instigator of the activity, my gendered position consequently becomes a contestable site of disagreement and protest. The effect constitutes an inferred sense that I, as the artist responsible for articulating and constructing this debate, can become a pariah to my gender and species.

My mouth is agape

– The experience physical

The nature of the action in *Licking Dogs* suggests that this is oral intimacy, sexual exchange turned bad between species. However, it is important to remember that licking is a biological response to stimuli, whether that is food, experience, sensation or other, beyond this reading. All mammals lick and salivate to taste, and to orally explore texture and surface. Different considerations begin to emerge and unravel as the work, and the repetitive licking action within the work, progresses. A reason for this development is the lack of changing pace in the licking. Sexual oral touch, overall, tends to escalate in intensity and ferocity, and the act develops in pace to coincide with heightened levels of arousal. However, the licking in *Licking Dogs* stays constant and lacks

the anticipation and enthusiasm of sexual interaction. In fact, irrespective of the pace set by the dogs⁵ the licking appears perfunctory and the tempo consistent.

Licking between species is perhaps regarded as a transgression of what is acceptable, and this is responsible for the action in *Licking Dogs* perhaps appearing indecent. It is accepted that the act of licking another's mouth agitates sexual references, for beyond ice creams and other forms of lick-reliant foodstuffs, the gesture has an inherent sense of being sensual and explicit. If we take this as a given, it is possible to see why the act of licking a dog's tongue might be initially understood as bestial even if this is not the intent. The sexual inferences associated with oral touch raise questions concerned with bestiality and propriety when performed between a human and animal, which the intimacy of *Licking Dogs* demonstrates. Yet, *Licking Dogs* hopes to go beyond its initial sexualized reading as it concerns the nature of collaboration between species. Trust and reflexivity is a vital component of collaboration and the interaction in *Licking Dogs* builds on that premise. Licking is fundamental to how a dog interacts with the world, and as such, their participation was made without an understanding of the sexual inferences normally associated with mutual licking. A dog licks to taste, communicate and show affection; in companionable circumstances, we trust the dog will lick and not bite us. Dogs essentially lick to say they like you, they do not lick to stimulate sexual activity (they do that in another, more direct way, and one that is not orally reliant).

The spit lands on the ground

– Displaced, its origin appears uncertain

The sexual inferences associated with oral touch raise questions concerned with bestiality and propriety when performed between a human and animal, which *Licking Dogs* demonstrates. Intimacy between the dogs and I is a temporal, but instinctive force that enters the performance quietly yet precisely in *Licking Dogs*. Cognitive and emotional compassion temporarily and unconsciously binds us around a common purpose to connect. The connection occurs as the performative action temporarily collapses the boundary between bodies, and sees species-specific roles lose distinction. Driven by empathy and mutual understanding, the dogs and I become intimately enmeshed in a relationship of oral exploration. We intuitively communicate beyond language and words. The effect is one of interplay and co-operation established through harmony between bodies and without ceremony. Locked

physically and psychologically into a transient relationship, our bodies co-exist in the collaboration in spite of differing socio-biological traits. Without language we still communicate and the work's use of primal and animal instincts make this apparent.

*My lips are still moist
– They feel cold and damp*



Figure 8.2 Spit

Notes

1. This term refers to the performer(s) and the audience.
2. Discussed in Benjamin, 1997, pp. 50–1.
3. Discussed in O'Dell, 1998, p. 7.
4. Discussed in Haraway, 2005, p. 12.
5. To start the process, I initially licked each dog on the mouth. Beyond this invitation to participate, the dogs were given the freedom to design the nature of the collaboration based on how involved, or uninvolved, they wished to be. No coercive methods beyond the initial lick were used. The pace set by each dog varies from gentle and prolonged licking strokes with the German Shepherd (Figure 8.1a) to lack of interest from the Patterdale Terrier (Figure 8.1c).

Mutual Dependencies

Edited by Katharine Meynell

with

Jeremy Akerman

Angela Bartram

Diann Bauer

Jon Bird

Sonia Boyce

Nicky Coutts

Gefn Press

Sigrd Holmwood

Susan Johanknecht

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Virginia Nimarkoh

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Emily Richardson

Maria Walsh

H.F. Westley-Smith

Gary Stevens

Will Stone

Mutual Dependencies

Mutual Dependencies is part artists' book and part academic research; it contains a range of collaborative and inter-dependant work exploring what the practice of art writing might be.

These pages include drawings, recollections, photographs and diagrams, recipes for pigments or preserves, writings, ruminations and tentative articulations; taken as a whole, it engages with the overlaps between score, script, performance, concept and drawing, *including scoring the table or drawing conclusions.*

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One Woman and her Dogs
Angela Bartram



The physical gap between individuals is closed, even if only briefly, in the moment that they touch. For Walter Benjamin, who believed full recognition of the similarity between species arose through physical contact, touch was significant.¹ Benjamin thought this presented an opportunity for humans and animals to realise their likeness. The 'type' of touch, however, is important in considering this. Generally, oral touch or kissing (unless violent or unwanted) is acceptable behavior between humans, but when an animal is involved its purpose becomes questionable.

Oral touch makes direct reference to intimate sexual acts between bodies and as such, how and whom we touch in this way gathers importance. The rules of engagement between species are shaken and made fragile through 'inappropriate' and unsolicited touch.

I make art-work with dogs, animals that face preconceptions about 'inappropriate' behaviour. I work with breeds whose mouths are generally associated with aggression and with those where copious salivating and drooling can provoke revulsion. This is a complex combination of apprehensive reactions to do with the amount of saliva being produced and the ways in which the dog uses its mouth. Dogs clean their own bodies by licking, mouth and saliva preen genitals and anus and with the same tongue they lick human faces in welcome, and could also bite. Therefore, the size, breed history or salivary capacity of dogs can make the idea of touching them troublesome.

In this work anxiety is aroused when the mouths of dog and woman connect. I lick them and they lick me – we lick each other's mouths, each other's teeth, and each other's tongues; we share and ingest each other's saliva. These dogs respond to my invitation to take part. This is not kissing as a sex act, but the exploration of the oral dimensions of another species. The desire in this work is not to shock or alarm, but to raise questions about the parameters of humanity by presenting a collaboration of equals, at ease with one another.

¹ Discussed in Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, London: Verso, 1997, pp. 50–1.



